

Q: What we'll be doing, sir, is going through a series of introductions and some general questions that we always ask. And then basically after that we'll be asking about your experiences.

August Van Gampeleare: Okay.

Q: At Pearl Harbor. Okay, great. This is Oral History Number 403. The following Oral History interview was conducted by Captain Marshall Hanson and Mr. Jack Green from the Naval Historical Center for the U. S. Arizona Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu, on December sixth, 2001, at 9:04 a.m. Person being interviewed is August Leo Van Gampeleare, who was a Seaman First Class on the USS Oklahoma on December seventh, 1941. And as I understand, you like to be called Augie.

August Van Gampeleare: Augie, yes, sir.

Q: A lot of people at the conference know you.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: For the record, please state your full name, place of birth, and birth date.

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Jan- uh.. January the ninth, 1922.

Q: And where were you born?

August Van Gampeleare: In uh.. Chicago.

Q: Chicago? And your name is August Leo Van Gampeleare?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Okay. What did you consider your home town in 1941?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Chicago.

Q: Chicago.

August Van Gampeleare: I mean uh.. yeah, no, Brookfield.

Q: Brookfield.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: And that was in Illinois?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes, sir.

Q: Okay. What were your parents' names?

August Van Gampeleare: My- dad- dad's name was Prosper, and my mother's name was Teresa.

Q: Okay. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

August Van Gampeleare: I had uh.. two sisters.

Q: Okay. And are they still alive today?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, my older sister died.

Q: Alright. Where did you go to high school?

August Van Gampeleare: In Riverside, Illinois.

Q: Okay, Riverside. Now, where and why did you enlist?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, to begin with, I was working in the bowling alley, and uh.. the people I was living with, he was in the Navy, too, so he talked me into joining up. That was it.

Q: Okay. And what- what day did you join?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Illinois.

Q: Okay. You joined in Illinois, but what was the date that you joined?

August Van Gampeleare: April twenty-third, 1940.

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

August Van Gampeleare: Great Lakes.

Q: Okay, and that was.

August Van Gampeleare: Illinois.

Q: In Illinois, just above Chicago?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: So you went through in basically May and June, when the weather was a little better at Great Lakes.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Anything that you remember in particular from boot camp that was special or you were just happy to get through it?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Just happy to get through it.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: It was pretty rough, I'll tell you.

Q: Now, where were your orders to when you left boot camp?

August Van Gampeleare: I went to the Oklahoma.

Q: Immediately.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Okay. And where was the Oklahoma?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Bremerton, Washington.

Q: Okay. And what was occurring in Bremerton to the Oklahoma to greet [ph?]?

August Van Gampeleare: Tie [ph?].

Q: What were they doing to the Oklahoma when they had her in Bremerton?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, she was uh.. getting a re uh.. uh.. what do they call, uh..

Q: Refitted?

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: And how long were you in Bremerton?

August Van Gampeleare: Oh, I think about two months.

Q: And out of Bremerton, where did the Oklahoma go to then?

August Van Gampeleare: Then we went to San Diego, and then from San Diego- San Diego we went to Pearl Harbor.

Q: Okay. In about what month did you arrive in Pearl Harbor?

August Van Gampeleare: I couldn't tell you.

Q: Okay. What was your first impression of Hawaii when you arrived?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, so I asked somebody about it. They told me that it was a Haw- in the Hawaiian Islands. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was.

Q: Okay. So when you first saw the Hawaiian Islands, what did you think?

August Van Gampeleare: Beautiful.

Q: So did you prefer having your ship home ported in Pearl Harbor or San Diego?

August Van Gampeleare: Pardon?

Q: Would you rather been in Pearl Harbor or back in San Diego?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. No. I'd rather be in Pearl Harbor.

Q: Okay. Living in Pearl Harbor, and I- you- you lived on the ship, correct?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes, sir.

Q: What was the favorite type of activity that you might have done?

August Van Gampeleare: The barroom. <Laugh>

Q: Hotel Street?

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: Okay. What division were you attached to?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. I- I forgot.

Q: Where did you work on the ship?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. On the deck. I was a deckhand.

Q: Deckhand? In what area were you? Being in the deck force, did you work a particular part of the ship, or did you work all over the ship?

August Van Gampeleare: We worked all over on store- on stores and everything.

Q: Okay. Did you have any special equipment on the ship that you worked with, or were you?

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: You just kind of did general.

August Van Gampeleare: General, yes, sir.

Q: Where was your battle station?

August Van Gampeleare: Geez, I- I- I couldn't tell you. I forgot.

Q: So you don't remember where you went to during general quarters?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I- I- uh.. I was in the powder room.

Q: Powder room. Okay. Now, we want to move ahead, and the day we want to look at first is De- December sixth, the day before the attack. Do you remember what you were doing on that Saturday?

August Van Gampeleare: No, I don't.

Q: Did you have the duty?

August Van Gampeleare: I might have.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: 'Cause I don't remember going ashore on a Saturday.

Q: Okay. And usually you'd remember that, right?

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Sunday morning. You're getting up on December seventh. Can you tell us what you were doing right before, and what- how you got involved during the attack?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I was going to go ashore, me and my buddy, and we only had uh.. about a dollar and a half, two dollars, you know. We just wanted to get off the ship. And uh.. I was in the shower- not in the shower, but I was in the washroom get- getting ready to go ashore. And uh.. uh.. all of a sudden there was a uh.. uh.. I thought maybe it was a ship hitting us. And uh.. so she started leaving, and uh.. then I got uh.. uh.. tried to get to the top side, and uh.. it took me quite awhile to get up to the up- up to the topside. And uh.. when I got to the topside, I walked towards the bow, and then slid down to the- the blister edge. And uh.. there was a- a sailor that put his uh.. trousers and his blouse and his hat and shoes on top of each other. But I didn't see him go down, or what- what he, you know. I didn't see anything of him. And then uh.. then when I uh.. slid down the blister edge, I

uh.. got into the water, I started swimming. I don't know where I was going, you know. I was all confused and shook up. And uh.. I started swimming, and then when I went down, I got tired. I went down, and I hit that muck. And when I hit the muck, I came up. But I- every time I ca- hit the much, I'd come up, and uh.. about uh.. two or three times, and I would say my goodbye for the last time. And the last time I got up, there was a motor launch alongside of me. But uh.. I didn't hear no noise or anything, and I didn't have to swim in fire or wa- or oil.

Q: Okay. You were lucky compared to

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Some of your shipmates.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes, sir.

Q: So you were on the harbor side.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: You- you didn't have the opportunity to swim to Port Island.

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: So you were out in the- the general harbor.

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: Swimming, and it was all confusion.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: And you were actually going down and touching the bottom.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: And then coming back up to the surface.

August Van Gampeleare: And I still feel that muck under my feet, if I think about it.

Q: I can imagine that. Now, you pulled out from the motor launch. Did they take you to Port Island?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes, sir, uh.. Port Island.

Q: Okay. And what happened to you once you were on the Island?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I went to the- we went to the Marine barracks, and then uh.. about a week or two weeks later, we went on the- the U- USS Chester, the heavy cruiser, uh.. but she was a beautiful ship. She had that wave in front of her bow. She was the best looking ship in the fleet.

Q: Okay. During the two weeks before you reported aboard your new ship, what type of assignments and duties did they have you doing?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I was on the deck- on the deckhand.

Q: Well, yes. But the Oklahoma's been lost.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: You reported to the barracks.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Did they have you on special details?

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: Did you help in the cleanup?

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: Or were you just kind of an extra person waiting for something?

August Van Gampeleare: Just uh.. uh.. they uh.. they didn't ask us to do anything.

Q: Okay. Let's revisit when you were in the washroom before, you know, just when you first, that first thump where you thought the ship had- somebody had come alongside.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah. Uh.. I thought there was a ship that hit us.

Q: Now, what deck was that washroom on?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Geez, I couldn't tell you.

Q: How far below the main deck were you?

August Van Gampeleare: About uh.. three uh.. three decks below.

Q: Three decks below. And did the lights stay on, or did it go dark? Were you working under battle lanterns?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. I don't remember no lights or anything.

Q: Okay. And how did you get from three decks below up to the main deck?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I went up uh.. the- the ladder to the top deck, uh.. and I had a hell of a time uh.. getting on topside, because of the

uh.. the mess uh.., you know, we had uh.. uh.. from the water from the mess, and uh.. uh.. I remember the deck being awful wet, and I had a hell of a time getting on topside.

Q: Now, when you went up the ladder way, normally at the top of each ladder you have a large hatch with a scuttle.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: In the <inaudible>.

August Van Gampeleare: Well, they were all open. Thank God for that.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Excuse me, but uh.. I didn't hear no abandon ship or the bugle or anything.

Q: Thank you. That's an important point.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

<crew talk>

Q: When- when you would- would go on liberty, and you went down to Hotel Street, did you go to the YMCA, the Army-Navy YMCA, or the Black Cat Café? Do you remember any?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, there was a place always went to. There was a Palm Café.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: And I met a lady there, and- and uh.. and uh.. I- when I went ashore I'd meet her.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: And uh.. she always wanted to play that uh..
"You Are My Sunshine."

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: Boy, I'll tell you.

Q: That was her song. That was her song.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah. That was her song, and I think we played it a thousand times.

Q: Now, did the Oklahoma have a special bar just for the ship's crew?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Do you recall the name of that bar?

August Van Gampeleare: No, I couldn't.

Q: Okay. But was it on Hotel Street?

August Van Gampeleare: I couldn't tell you.

Q: Okay. Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: See, I had a slight stroke and I forgot a lot of things.

Q: I understand. You're doing very well.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: God, I can remember things from sixty years ago.

August Van Gampeleare: <Laugh>

Q: So you went to the Chester, and how long were you aboard the Chester?

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. About a year and a half.

Q: Did you go to new construction from there, or did you go to training, or?

August Van Gampeleare: What?

Q: What- what did you do after the Chester? Did you go to new construction or to training?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I'll tell you guys the truth. I went on a- the YG-29. It was a garbage scow.

Q: Oh, okay.

August Van Gampeleare: That was good duty. We had all we could eat.

Q: <Laugh> So when the war ended, where were you assigned? Where were you stationed?

August Van Gampeleare: I was in San Diego with the garbage scow.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: See, we left uh.. Bermuda. Then we came through the Panama Canal and up the west coast. They told us there was no submarines or, you know, we didn't have to worry about anything. All we had were the machinegun. That- that was a great help.

Q: Now, how long was your total active service?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, uh.. I- uh.. six years. And then I got out of the service, and then I went back for two years. Then I got married, and that was it.

Q: Okay. When you returned to the service, that was just something you wanted to do?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes, uh huh.

Q: What was your rate at the end?

August Van Gampeleare: Seaman First.

Q: But, no. When you finished your Naval service, what was your rate at the finish of your Naval service, when you.

August Van Gampeleare: Seaman First Class.

Q: So you- you, okay. And did you have any specialty by the time you?

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: Retired?

August Van Gampeleare: I didn't behave myself.

Q: Oh, okay. Sounds like a whole new story there. <Laugh> Is there anything that you feel is important about December seventh and the attack on Pearl Harbor you'd like to share with us that we maybe didn't <inaudible>.

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I just thank God that I'm still here, 'cause uh.. I- I- I- uh.. I did- I didn't think I was gonna make it.

Q: Okay. Now, is this your first visit back to Hawaii, or were you here for fiftieth?

August Van Gampeleare: No. I was here three- three times already.

Q: Three times before.

August Van Gampeleare: With- uh.. with my uh.. sister and my wife, and her girlfriend. And then uh.. but uh.. last year, wasn't it, Dave? We- we came back uh.. just me and him, and then uh.. wh- when uh.. uh.. what- what was I gonna tell? Uh.. Where was I, Dave? <Laugh>

Dave: I'm not sure.

August Van Gampeleare: Well, uh.. la- uh.. last year I went with him and just me and him alone. So when we uh.. when uh.. then when the- when we were leaving Hono uh.. you know, Hawaii, he said that he was gonna bring his wife and uh.. a- a daughter.

Q: I've had a chance to meet them. They're both lovely ladies.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah. Oh, she's my angel. So is he. So is his daughter.

Q: So the whole family is really nice for you.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Now, I understand was it yesterday you had a chance to go to Port Island, and go to the marker for the Oklahoma?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: What type of feelings did you have when you got back to that spot?

August Van Gampeleare: Well, I didn't like the idea that uh.. there was no memorial, you know, for the Oklahoma, 'cause the Missouri was there.

Q: Hum, so there's more <inaudible>.

August Van Gampeleare: And I'd appreciate it if somebody would make a, you know, a little stone or a plaque or something, 'cause I'd be willing to donate to that.

Q: That's all I know.

August Van Gampeleare: That's how I'm trying. I'm mad about it.

Q: Well, there are many markers on the Island. The Oklahoma should be represented.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: I understand that later on you served aboard the USS Kearsarge, the aircraft carrier.

August Van Gampeleare: Yes. I was on the Kearsarge. I didn't stay there but uh.. two months, I think it was.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: And then I was transferred to the YG, to the garbage scow.

Q: She was a brand new carrier at the time.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah, she was.

Q: You were part of the commissioning crew of the USS Kearsarge?

August Van Gampeleare: Pardon?

Q: Were you a plank owner on board the carrier? Were you a plank owner of Kearsarge?

August Van Gampeleare: A what?

Q: A plank owner.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah.

Q: You were. You were a plank owner.

August Van Gampeleare: Yeah, a plank uh.. captain. Yeah.

Q: Were you a plank owner from the USS Kearsarge?

August Van Gampeleare: Yes.

Q: Okay. Okay. I understand you have a story about what the captain said about being shot at.

August Van Gampeleare: What?

Q: You have a story about what the captain of the Kearsarge said about being shot at.

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. uh.. I- we- we didn't see no action on the Kearsarge.

Q: Oh. But did the- did the skipper of the carrier have a story about his career and getting shot at?

August Van Gampeleare: No.

Q: Okay.

August Van Gampeleare: Not that I can recall.

Q: Okay. Okay. That's all I have. Well, that's all I have. Sir, I think you for.

August Van Gampeleare: Well, thank you.

Q: Sharing your experience with us, and I also thank you very much for serving this country.

August Van Gampeleare: Uh.. Thank you. God bless you.

Q: God bless you.

End of Tape 403 August Van Gampeleare